

like the beatific beat saints of old
& find immortality as a regular married-to-poverty
backpacking bum.

I didn't want anything to do with
prison-grey suits, white shirt straightjackets or
choking striped ties.

Dad turns the pages of his life with the photos
& starts telling his old war stories again
about sweating his way through the jungles of Burma.
He swears he still has the scar from the shell that
sideswiped his back.

I ask him if he had it to do all over again
would he fight? "No," he says. "I don't think I would."
Which surprises me, WWII being the good war & all
& knowing too that our impending argument over whether
COs could still love their country right or wrong
had only been prevented by the Saigon airlift. But now,
in a voice as mellow as the 12-year-old Scotch he's
balancing on his knee,
dad tells me about the day he was discharged from the army
& found himself standing alone at a Greyhound bus station
in Boston:

"Up to that point there'd always been someone
giving me orders saying what I had to do where
I had to go & then all of a sudden there I was
on my own with no one to tell me to go up to
that bus ticket window & buy that bus ticket
home."

Right at that moment he could've gone anywhere in the
world he wanted,
but the only place he wanted to go was home.
I remember one night walking down a deserted country road
looking for a dry place to unroll my sleeping bag &
enjoy a few moments of sleepful oblivion.
I was thinking how nice it would be just to be home
to sit by the fire with a cup of hot tea
& go to sleep in my own bed with my own soft pillow.
But the rain was falling down; my sleeping bag was soaked.
There was nothing to do but walk on.
Now here I am,
sitting with my dad looking at the old photos all cozy
by the fireplace
knowing that home isn't really home any more
once you've gone.

THE VACANT CHAIR

There's a chair at the table no one sits in
because it used to be grandpa's.
He died just three weeks before I made it home.
He was 96 years old. I never got to see him,
only the place where he was buried

in the old Massillon cemetery with a hard granite tombstone
 over his head. He'd gone away, just like me.
 Told me that the ones who didn't like to roam stayed home,
 meaning the folks back in the old country
 who still live on the land they've lived on for generations.
 Technically the State now owns the land.
 But centuries into the future if there be any people
 or land at all
 the roots of our family tree will still be buried deep
 in that soil
 and the tree will be sprouting new buds.
 Maybe by then the State will have withered away.
 I went back to the old country once to visit the relatives.
 I saw their mud-plaster homes and grape arbors.
 I drank their good peasant wine and their good peasant food.
 One of my cousins had married a soldier.
 He goosestepped over for the introductions,
 then stood there at attention, icy formal,
 all straight up in his uniform, hat and medals,
 proud scowl on his thin lips and blinkless eyes.
 I smiled at him in my blue jeans and tennis shoes and
 said "Howdy!"

The goodbyes were harder:
 hugging all my aunts,
 big buxom Bulgarian women I could hardly get my arms around.
 When I shook my uncle's hand
 I could feel just how calloused and proletarian it was,
 how bourgeois mine was in comparison.
 So this is what grandpa left. He'd told me all about
 fighting in the Balkans, deserting the army, stow-
 awaying across the oceans, crossing the Peace
 Bridge, hoboing from town to jobless town
 until he finally ended up here, me looking on
 with places of my own to go to
 before my own chair is empty.

— Richard Evanoff

Tokyo, Japan

WHEN THE IRS COMES KNOCKING

— for Scott Preston

i'm not sure they'll believe me
 when i tell them
 that, in this day and age
 of upward mobility,
 i have lived on an income
 of less than 6,000 a year
 for the last 5 years.

and lived quite comfortably too.